

NSC BRIEFING

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FRENCH ACTION IN MOROCCO CREATES NEW PROBLEMS

Although the French government's exchange of sultans in Morocco will enable French authorities to revamp the protectorate's administration along the lines that they desire, the basic conflict between Moroccan desires for home rule and the French wish to maintain absolute control remains unresolved. American unpopularity in the area will increase, and US treaty rights and airbases are endangered.

On 20 August the French cabinet finally yielded to pressure from the Residency General and French vested interests in Morocco and approved the removal of Sidi Mohamed ben Youssef as sultan of Morocco, replacing him with a cousin, Moulay Mohamed ben Arafa. The latter, who had been declared the religious ruler of Morocco by tribal chieftain El Glaoui six days earlier, precipitating the latest crisis, was duly confirmed as sultan by religious elders on 21 August.

French-proposed "reforms," alleged to be the point at issue between the former sultan and French authorities, will be approved by the new sultan, whom the French feel sure they can control. These measures superficially modernize the local government by imposing a facade of quasi-democratic institutions. Theoretically they provide for a separation of executive, legislative, and judicial power; but actually they legalize direct French administration in the protectorate.

France's gains through ousting the sultan are far outweighed by its prospective losses, however. Replacement of the able and moderate Ben Youssef by an aged, reactionary figurehead will win some temporary political support from feudal tribesmen and seekers of political plums. On the other hand, this gain will be more than offset by the alienation of the growing middle-class, which includes the bulk of the Western-educated and politically conscious Arabs and Berbers.

The allegiance of El Glaoui, who spearheaded the anti-sultan movement built up by Residency officials in contravention of the French Foreign Ministry's instructions, cannot be considered permanent. Having won a personal victory to the embarrassment of Paris, his demands will probably be excessive and his activities cause the French more trouble. The French may therefore resort again to divide-and-rule tactics in order to curb El Glaoui.

Dethronement of the popular sultan will increase the animosity toward the French, already widespread among both Berbers and Arabs. It will further embitter the approximately two million Arabs and Berbers who sympathize with the nationalist Istiqlal party, which has about 100,000 hard-core members. It will increase the likelihood of their becoming prey to anti-American propaganda spread by the Communists, who number about 5,000, with a hard-core of several hundred and a European directorate.

The Istiqlal party may now abandon moderation and resort to underground terrorism. Although it is not known to have any military equipment and could not now stage a full-scale rebellion, it will try to obtain foreign support, secure weapons, and subvert native troops. Despite extensive security measures, isolated incidents of violence are taking place.

Prolonged political agitation would force the French to retain their large military establishment in Morocco consisting of more than 66,000 army, navy, air and quasi-military forces, indirectly affecting France's NATO contribution.

France's policy is assured of the support of other colonial powers, particularly the United Kingdom and the Netherlands; but Spain, which holds a protectorate over northern Morocco, is not likely to give more than tacit approval so long as it continues its policy of rapprochement with the Arab states. The immediate denunciation of France by the Arab-Asian bloc and its request for Security Council action will probably be supported by the anticolonial nations.

Bitter debate within either the Security Council or the General Assembly seems assured and again poses a dilemma for the United States. Support for France would antagonize Middle Eastern states, while support for the Arab-Asian bloc would alienate a NATO partner. The Soviet Union, anxious to see a rift in the Western alliance, will benefit from this controversy.

The removal of the sultan worsens the position of the United States in Morocco. American popularity among the natives in general and the nationalists in particular will diminish because they hoped for support for their aspirations and feel betrayed by the failure of the US to intervene with France.

French settlers and vested interests in Morocco are highly suspicious of American intentions. This attitude will be sharpened following the expression on 21 August of official US concern. Moreover, the Residency General will probably repeat previous charges that American officials have assisted the nationalists.

The four operational American air force and naval air bases in Morocco will be targets for sabotage if the Communists or the nationalists resort to terrorism. Local French pressures on Paris may also prolong the delays in building the other two bases provided for in a French-American agreement of December 1950.

The new French-dominated sultan may be asked to denounce the US-Moroccan treaty of 1836, the basis of American treaty rights in Morocco. France has long sought to annul the extra-territorial privileges which only the US continues to hold and which were upheld by the World Court in August 1952. Abrogation of this treaty would end the commercial open door in Morocco which has existed since the signing of the Treaty of Algeciras in 1906.